



CITY OF WATERTOWN, NEW YORK

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JOSEPH M. BUTLER, JR.
Mayor

PRESS RELEASE

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Contact: Mayor's Office

COMMENTS FROM MAYOR JOSEPH M. BUTLER, JR. ON NEGOTIATIONS WITH THE FIRE DEPARTMENT

As Mayor of the City of Watertown it is important to communicate the City's position regarding the ongoing negotiations with the Firefighter's Union as well as the proposed 2016-2017 budget as it pertains to the Fire Department. One of the most important duties we have to the City residents is to provide a public safety model that meets the needs of our citizens and the firefighters who provide for the protection of life and property, without compromising the financial strength of our City and adding to the burden of taxpayers. We view public safety from a broad perspective, and it should be our responsibility to determine how to allocate resources not only to the fire department, but the police department as well. We currently employ more firefighters than we do police personnel, and our recent decision to support the addition of one person to the Police Department while reducing the number of firefighters by three positions through attrition reflects a more balanced public safety model.

Similar to many New York State municipalities, the City is held to an annual tax cap. The City's tax cap is .92%, or in dollar terms less than \$80,000 on a current levy of approximately \$8.4 million. As you can see, the tax cap hampers the ability to grow services, much less sustain the ones that we already provide. In order to sustain a firefighting model that mandates a minimum staffing of 15 firefighters per shift, we will have to override the tax cap and continue to increase taxes to meet the demands of a collective bargaining agreement that currently places us at odds with the Firefighter Union. Revenue from sales taxes, mortgage taxes, cable taxes and sale of excess hydroelectric production are volatile and not predictable. State aid has remained flat for several years, and we do not anticipate this to grow. With the majority of revenue streams variable, it is necessary to look at the expense side of the balance sheet and find cost-cutting measures to remain financially strong.

As public servants, it is our responsibility to examine each service and the corresponding level of service; to challenge the stagnant; to find cost saving measures and efficiencies; and to question the way things have been done for many years.

The contract between the City and the Firefighter's Union has been a fixed cost model for years, based on fixed manning constraints. It was examined during the negotiation process and now in mediation. More than 90% of the Fire Department's costs are personnel related. Keep in mind firefighter wages, holiday pay, EMT incentives, retirement, and 88% of health care costs are paid by taxpayers. Furthermore, overtime costs forecasted in this year's budget at almost \$500,000 result from an outdated agreement that continues to burden taxpayers because of many costly provisions, not the least of which is a minimum manning clause permanently embedded in the current agreement.

As the governing body for the City of Watertown elected by the citizens of Watertown, we should have the ability to determine staffing levels. The language in the collective bargaining agreement takes this authority away from taxpayers and transfers it to the Firefighter Union leaving the Council with little authority or ability to control costs. No other union represented by City employees has the same language that mandates staffing levels.

The City Manager has been charged by the City Council to determine a fair, reasonable and cost effective solution to correct the cost and organizational structure of the Department.

Until now, the City Council and City Manager have abided by the belief that mediation is an extension of negotiations and that any details resulting from City-Union meetings should remain confidential in the hope that a mutually agreeable contract will be achieved. It is apparent that the Firefighter Union does not feel the same. As a result, during the following days and weeks, the City Manager shall systemically release a series of facts that we have discovered which support our position of why we believe the status quo must change and the outdated model of operation be brought in line with a more sustainable model that is fair to the citizens we represent.

In defense of the overburdened taxpayer, it is our obligation and responsibility to negotiate a model that will place the power of determining public safety in the hands of the people we serve and protect.

We look forward to the input from our citizens and welcome your comments as always. It is your City, and it is our privilege and honor to represent the fine citizens of Watertown.

Joseph M. Butler, Jr.
Mayor